

THE BARAMA RIVER CARIBS OF BRITISH GUIANA

SUSTENANCE

LIFE on the Barama, unlike that reported from certain other ²⁶²
tropical environments, cannot be supported by so simple a means
as merely plucking the fruits which a bountiful nature places
within easy reach of the hand of man. The jungle yields no
vegetable products which are or can be used as a staple human
diet; and the animals which inhabit the bush have a wary way of
eluding unskillful hunters. Likewise the fish of the streams show
an annoying liking for the water of their native habitats in preference
to that of a cooking pot. The mere business of filling bellies,
therefore, occupies a considerable amount of the time and effort
of the Caribs, although rarely is this essential activity so demanding
as to exclude all others or an enviable amount of leisure.

The fact that the Caribs are not celebrated in more sophisticated
parts of the earth for their culinary accomplishments, with ¹⁴⁶
the possible exception of alleged anthropophagous delicacies formerly ²⁶²
attributed to them, becomes intelligible after an intimate
acquaintanceship with their methods of acquiring and preparing
food. The diet, nevertheless, is fairly varied and, as can be said
of almost any outlandish food, "is not disagreeable to the civilized
palate" after said palate has passed a somewhat unappetizing
apprenticeship. The one apparently serious omission from the
menu is a regular and proper amount of "roughage," a lack which
gives rise to a notable degree of constipation and stomach trouble
among the natives.

The two staples which are absolutely essential to a Carib are ²⁶²
meat (or fish) and cassava. They figure in practically every meal ²²⁴
to such an extent that the other food products may almost be
regarded as garnishings, while on long trips over the trail or on
the river they are relied upon exclusively. The men of the family
are responsible for the supply of meat and fish. To this end a
man usually goes out hunting every few days, depending upon the
meat stock which is in the house, and he stays out until he has

175
657
164 82 had malaria and 126 had had it recently. Together, this is an increase to 66.9 percent of the tested population. In the fall of 1967, there were 412 people living in the Upper Barama area according to the Malaria Eradication Programme reports. Of this number, 396 were tested for malaria. At that time, only 14 were positive for the disease, 23 were positive for recent fever. This is a reduction to an incidence of 9.3 percent of the tested population in little more than a year. Since then, there have been no positive tests for malaria in the Upper Barama area.

657
164
165 More short term campaigns have been made to treat other diseases among the Upper Barama Caribs. Although there are no records of mortality among this population, epidemics which have caused multiple deaths have been attended by medical teams from Georgetown. In the summer of 1966, about 150 people were treated during an epidemic of measles. Later, an outbreak of gastroenteritis received the attention of a medical team. Seven people died during this last epidemic. Most other deaths have been single events.

164 There are no reliable records for the incidence of other diseases. Worms and other parasites are still a major health problem. This is especially the case around Baramita Air Strip with so many families

(514)
* (77) commonly using small creeks for all purposes. There has been some efforts to promote the use of pit latrines, and four of these are in existence at the Air Strip. Also, malnutrition is a health factor.

146 During the year of field work, weight loss was observed among the people who had been dependent on employment at the mine. Also, (142) burnished hair and pot bellies, signs of protein deficiency, are

• 146 common among all children in the age range from about eighteen months
[142] to four years. These children no longer nurse and yet are not old
enough to effectively gather casual protein and other foods on their
[597] own. However, if a family's subsistence crisis becomes extended, a
child in this age range may be given up for adoption, usually by a
family of immediate kinsmen. Three cases of such adoption recently
occurred among the segment of the population at the Air Strip. Con-
sequently, the protein deprivation of children was not sufficient to
146 cause any deaths during August 1970 to July 1971. For this period,
165 two deaths occurred in the total population. Both were in the age
category of over sixty-five.

*177 Clearly, health programs cannot be held responsible for any major
161 changes in population size which occurred before 1960. Health care
657 has been introduced only in the last years and certainly has influenced
[165] the mortality rate of infants and others. Nevertheless, the change in
the pattern of reproduction occurred previous to these health meas-
ures, as will be apparent from data collected among the population in
question during 1970-71.

162 During 1971, there were 551 Caribs in the Upper Barama River
361 drainage basin. This number includes 280 males and 271 females. The
age structure and sex composition for the total population are pre-
sented in Table 7. Table 8 reports the age structure and sex com-
position for the segment of the population at Baramita Air Strip;
Table 9, for the remaining population in the satellite settlements.

162 As is clear, 264 or 47.9 percent of the total population is under
*177 ten years of age. Also, it is apparent that this larger proportion
[TEXT CONTINUED ON PAGE 65]